# Early steamboating on the Minnesota and Red Rivers /

## EARLY STEAMBOATING ON THE MINNESOTA AND RED RIVERS.* BY CAPTAIN EDWIN BELL.

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### ST. PAUL AND ITS VICINITY IN 1850.

On the 16th day of December, 1850, I called on Governor Ramsey at his new house on Walnut street, to which he had recently moved. The governor was surrounded by a large delegation of Sioux Indians, each of whom had a long-stem pipe across his lap. Those were the first wild Indians I had ever seen. Their faces were painted in streaks of red and black, and many of them had eagle feathers on their heads. They were orderly, so far as I could see, and I little thought that within a few years I should carry their yearly supplies to Redwood Agency, and guns and ammunition up the Minnesota river to destroy these same Indians.

St. Paul at that time was little more than an Indian-trading post. The Indians in winter camped in the heavy timber on the west side of the river from Kaposia to a point opposite St. Paul. As soon as the ice formed so as to bear them, great numbers would cross over to trade. Trading was done with A. L. Larpenteur, on the corner of Third and Jackson streets; with Mr. Simpson, on Minnesota and Third streets; and the Fuller Brothers, at the Upper Levee. All these traders dealt heavily in furs.

In the year 1850, I preëmpted what is now called Langdon, situated near the river, fifteen miles below St. Paul. After I finished 92 my house on the prairie and moved in, the Sioux used to pass frequently on their way to Point Douglas. During the two years we were

on the prairie, we were not troubled by them, neither did we hear of any family that was troubled. I found that farming was not my forte, so I returned to St. Paul.

**STEAMBOATING ON THE MINNESOTA RIVER.**

In 1855 I had command of the steamer Globe, making trips on the Minnesota river, and in the early fall of that year we carried supplies to the Sioux at Redwood Agency. The Indians would come down the river several miles to meet the boat. They were like a lot of children, and when the steamboat approached they would shout, “Nitonka pata-wata washta,” meaning, “Your big fire-canoe is good.” They would then cut across the bend, yelling until we reached the landing.

In the fall of that year, 1855, their supplies were late, when I received orders from Agent Murphy to turn over to the Indians twelve barrels of pork, and twelve barrels of flour. As soon as we landed, we rolled the supplies on shore. I was informed that the Indians were in a starving condition. It was amusing to see five or six of them rolling a barrel of pork up the bank, when two of our deck hands would do the work in half the time.

A young Indian girl stood at the end of the gang plank, wringing her hands and looking toward the boat, exclaiming “Sunka wanicha,” meaning “They have my dog.” The cabin boy told me the cook had coaxed the dog on board and hid it. I could speak the language so as to be understood, and I motioned to the girl and said, “Niye kuwa,” meaning “Come here.” She came on board, and I told the cook to bring the dog to me. When the dog came, she caught it in her arms, exclaiming, “Sunka washta,” meaning “Good dog.” She then ran on shore and up the hill. It seemed to me that white people took advantage of the Indian when they could, even steamboat cooks.

When the flour and pork were on level ground, the barrel heads were knocked in, and the pork was cut in small strips and thrown in a pile. Two hundred squaws then formed

a circle, and several Indians handed the pieces of pork to the squaws until the pile was disposed of. The flour was placed in tin pans, each squaw receiving a panful.

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Later, in the same season, we had an unfortunate trip. The boat was loaded deep. Luckily Agent Murphy and Capt. Louis Robert were on board. We had in the cabin of the boat ninety thousand dollars in gold. About three miles below the Agency, we ran on a large boulder. After much effort, we got the boat afloat. Major Murphy gave orders to land the goods, so that they might be hauled to the Agency. We landed and unloaded, covering the goods with tarpaulins. There were about fifty kegs of powder with the goods. While we were unloading, the agent sent for a team to take Captain Robert and himself, with the gold, to the Agency. Then we started down the river. We had gone only a few miles, when we discovered a dense smoke, caused by a prairie fire. The smoke was rolling toward the pile of goods, which we had left in charge of two men. When we reached the ferry at Red Bank, a man on horseback motioned us to land, and told us that the goods we left were all burnt up and the powder exploded. This was a sad blow to the Indians.

The following is a list of the steamboats running on the Minnesota river, during high water, in the year 1855 and later: Clarion, Captain Humberson; Globe, Captain Edwin Bell; Time and Tide, Captain Nelson Robert; Jeannette Roberts, Captain Charles Timmens; Mollie Moler, Captain Houghton; Minnesota, Captain Hays; and the Frank Steele and Favorite, both sidewheel steamers. These boats were drawn off when the water got low; and when the railroad paralleled the river, all boats quit running.

On the 16th day of December, 1895, I called on Governor Ramsey again, to talk over old times, forty-five years after my first call. What changes have taken place since then! When I started to leave, I thought I would see how much the governor remembered of the Sioux language. I said, “Governor, nitonka tepee, washta.” “What did you say, captain ?” asked the governor. I replied, “Nitonka tepee, washta.” “Why, captain,” said he, “that means, My house is large and good;” and, with a wink, “Captain, let's have a nip.” Of course we

nipped, and said “Ho!” All old settlers will know the meaning of the Sioux exclamation, “Ho!”

**RECOLLECTIONS OF THE RED RIVER OF THE NORTH.**

In the summer of 1859 I arranged with Mr. J. C. Burbank 94 to go to the Red River of the North to take charge of the steamboat Anson Northup, load the freight on the boat, and take it to Fort Garry. This was the first steamboat ever run on the Red river.

I was to take a few men with me for deck hands, and Dudley Kelly, a brother of Patrick H. Kelly, as clerk. I would find a pilot and engineer at the boat. We left the next morning on the stage. On arriving at the Red river, we were informed that the boat had started for the townsite of Georgetown, in charge of the stage agent. If we drove fast, they said, we would overtake the boat, as the river was very crooked. We got ahead of her, and when we heard her coming around the bend, we hailed them. They landed, and I went on board and showed my papers to the man in charge of the boat, who introduced me to the pilot, Jesse Young, and also to Lem Young, the engineer. Then leaving us, he got on the stage, going to Abercrombie.

We started for Georgetown. We found three deck hands on the boat. Two were old pinery men. They were of great service afterward at Goose rapids. There were also two families on board, the first pioneer families coming through the United States to Fort Garry. All others came by the way of Hudson bay. Two men were also passengers, one a minister. We soon landed at Georgetown, and loaded the freight on the boat.

Two more passengers got on board there for Fort Garry. I inquired about the river below. They said the water was deep down to the fort. As voyageurs, in their birch canoes, they had passed up and down without trouble, but we found a steamboat a little different from a canoe. I called a meeting to find out the amount of provisions there was on board, as in our stage trip to the Red river we had passed the wagon with provisions for the boat. They had a broken wheel, and a man had gone back to St. Cloud for a new one. This would

take several days. The passengers and crew were all anxious to start down the river, and, as there were provisions to last through the trip, all went well until we reached Goose rapids.

There we saw the break of boulders in the channel of the river, and we also saw shoal water on a gravel bar below. The pilot and I took the small skiff to examine. We found that the boulders would have to be removed before we could get through. We made scrapers to dig below the boulders. When we had dug 95 a hole large enough to hold a boulder, we brought the bow of the boat against it and then came ahead, shoving the boulder into the opening we had made.

This we continued to do until the boulders were all out of the way, and then we started over the bar. Getting half way over, the boat stuck fast. We commenced to carry the freight on shore, to lighten; and fortunately the freight was in square packages with lugs. The men would turn their backs to the guard of the boat, receive a package, and wade to shore, to the pile. This was of no benefit, as the water fell fast. I sent two men back to Georgetown, to have Mr. Joseph McKay come and get the freight.

When we had the boat unloaded we tried to move her by backing to throw the water under her, and then reversed to come ahead quick for starting. It was of no use. Some of our party wanted me to abandon the steamboat and strike for Pembina, a hundred miles or more down the river. I said “No,” and at once decided to build a dam, this being the first dam ever put in on the Red river.

I will describe the way it was built. First we cut two cottonwood logs, ten feet long, and chopped out the middle to form a trough, leaving the ends and sides of each. We then spliced them together, calked them, and built a platform on this scow for men to stand on to drive stakes. The stakes were cut about seven feet long and sharpened. We commenced to drive from the east shore, and drove a straight line of stakes to the boat. We had a man at each end of the scow, to hold it up to the stakes, and to move it as the

stakes were driven. There was a very strong current over the bar. We knew that if the dam was not a success there would be starvation, for our provisions were nearly exhausted and we were a long way from civilization.

Now came the tug of war. Our crew cut cottonwood logs, twelve feet long, and rolled them to the river. This was hard work. All brush had to be cut in front of the logs to clear the way. When in the water two or three men would follow them to place them in line above the stakes. This was done until we had enough to reach to the boat.

We had as a passenger a hearty Scotch minister. He sent for me to come on board for prayers. I went. After prayers he 96 spoke as though I ought to have brought the men with me. I said to him, “God will help them that help themselves.”

The dam required a large amount of brush. This was carried to the lower side of the logs, to be put on them with the brush ends up stream and the butts on the logs. While we were so placing the brush, I looked on the shore where the freight was piled, and saw a man. He hailed us and came on board. It was Capt. Russell Blakeley. I explained to him the condition we were in. He pulled from his pocket a lot of fish lines and hooks, and handed them to me. They proved a great blessing to us. I knew then that they would save us from starving. All who could be spared from the work began fishing, and they had great success. We continued to pile the brush on the logs, and when we got about half way from the shore to the boat I could see the water begin to rise above the dam. When we got to within fifteen feet of the boat with the brush, she rose and shot over the bar into deep water.

We hauled the small scow aboard, which was built for driving the stakes, fearing that we might need it farther down the stream. Then we raised steam and started for Fort Garry, Captain Blakeley going with us from Goose rapids. When we reached the mouth of the Red Lake river, we saw a great many birch canoes on the west batik of the Red river. We

heard later at Fort Garry that the Indians intended to intercept the boat; but they had got out of provisions, and had left their canoes to go on a hunt.

Just below the Red Lake river we caught up with two men in a canoe. They had a large number of geese and goslings in their canoe that they had shot. We lifted their canoe on board, and I offered to buy their game. They refused to sell, but made us a present of all they had, knowing the need we were in. We then lived high on fish and goslings for breakfast, goose for dinner, and goslings for supper.

The boat being light, we reached Fort Garry without further trouble. We unloaded the passengers and freight, and then had to find a place to lay the boat up in safety for the winter. We were recommended to take her to the Stone Fort, about fifteen miles below Fort Garry.

In the morning we got ready to start for the Stone Fort, 97 when a few men came and said they wanted to go down to the fort with us. After landing at the fort, a few more men came and said they wanted to take a short ride as they never had seen a steamboat before. We started, and about five miles below the Stone Fort, we saw a band of Indians looking with wonder at the boat. When we got opposite the Indians, I motioned to the pilot to blow the whistle. He did so, and such a scattering you never saw. Some ran, and some jumped into the bulrushes close by to hide. One of the gentlemen called to them, and they came to the boat laughing and having great fun among themselves. Then we returned and laid the boat up. The engineer drained the pumps and blew the water out of the boilers, leaving the boat in good order for the winter.

**SCENES AT FORT GARRY IN 1859.**

All the crew walked to Fort Garry, and we made our camp at the mouth of the Assiniboine, to wait for the ox train to go to Georgetown.

I visited the fort several times. They were very precise in all their movements within. The bell rang at nine o'clock, and the gate was opened for trade. All goods came by way of Hudson bay. I was invited to dine with Governor McTavish, and had a pleasant time, talking about our trip down the river. He asked me, with a twinkle in his eye, if the minister prayed us over the bar.

I was invited to attend an Indian feast in the morning. It was a religious ceremony, and in the afternoon a feast. It was held in an enclosure made of brush. No one was allowed inside except their band, but we could see over the fence all that transpired. The Indians sat on the ground inside the enclosure, and there were in the center, at certain distances apart, five large dead dogs with their hair singed off. At the head of the enclosure a young squaw sat on a bed of moss. She wore a new red blanket, and her hair was braided and hung down her back. An Indian would spring up and go with a kind of hop, holding a beaver skin in his hand and shaking it before her, saying something as though asking a blessing. She would nod, and he would pass around the squaw. The next Indian brought an otter skin, the next a muskrat, 7 98 and so on until they had brought all the animals, going through the same ceremony as with the beaver. The next were geese, ducks, and other birds, and so on down to hay from the marsh. The company then broke up until the afternoon.

Going back about one o'clock, I found the squaws making soup from the dogs that were in the enclosure. The Indians went and took their seats as before, the young squaw in her place. The squaws brought the soup to the entrance, and then the Indians took the kettles of soup with a ladle in each kettle, and it was passed around, each Indian taking a sup, until the soup was all gone. I left before the company broke up.

Winnipeg now is not as Fort Garry was then. There were only three houses there. I went across the river several times to visit Mr. Norman W. Kittson in his Indian trading post, and always had a pleasant call.

**THE RETURN BY OX TRAIN TO ST. PAUL.**

When the train was ready to start for Georgetown, each of us had an ox cart to travel in. We then started on our long journey. We made a short stop at Pembina. The second day out from there we saw some buffaloes running over the hills. The hunter for the train started for them, and in a few hours returned with all the meat and hide he could carry on his horse. The hide was for harness. We passed deep paths made by the buffaloes going in single file from lake to lake.

We made camp early that evening, having found good feed and water for the cattle. Standing by a large oak tree, in full view was an immense buffalo. A man from St. Paul who was in the train gave the hunter two dollars to let him take a horse and gun to kill the buffalo. When the man got within thirty yards of him, the buffalo started toward the man. He shot, but did not take time to look around to see if he had killed the buffalo. It was amusement for us to see the buffalo chasing the man on horseback. The way our expert hunter killed the buffalo was interesting. He circled around him, and then shot. He dropped dead.

We were called next morning early. The oxen were all near the carts excepting mine. I could see him a long way behind feeding, and Mr. Dudley Kelly and I started for him. By the 99 time we arrived where we thought the ox was, there came a dense fog, so that we could not see thirty feet ahead of us. I exclaimed, “Dudley, we are lost! I haven't a knife or match with me,” he said. “Well,” said I, pointing to the large frogs in the grass, “as long as these fellows are jumping around, we will not starve.” I knew the way the wind blew when we left camp, and I was sure by keeping the wind on my left shoulder I could return to it.

After about half an hour's walking, I said, “There is the tree near the camp where the buffalo was that we killed last night.” As we approached the tree, we could see, through the mist, that the limbs were moving. Directly we heard a voice. The tree was Captain Blakeley, and the limbs moving were his arms waving for us. He was on the road waiting

for us, and it was a great relief to find him. He informed us that the train had moved on. We did not overtake it until they went into camp.

This must have been the great hunting ground for the Indian, as there were thousands and thousands of bleached buffalo bones lying on the prairie.

We reached Georgetown all right, and thence we left the river and went across the country to St. Cloud. When we arrived at the Crow river, the water was so high that we had to ford it, carrying our clothes on our heads, and it was indeed a cold bath, as there was ice on the edge of the river. We arrived at home in St. Paul safely after a hard trip.

**INCIDENTS OF THE SIOUX OUTBREAK.**

In August, 1862, we were making the steamboat trip from St. Paul to Carver and back again daily. On one of our return trips from Carver in the latter part of that month, as we arrived opposite Fort Snelling we were hailed by two soldiers, with guns, and ordered to land. As soon as our head line was made fast, one of the soldiers came on board and asked me whether I was captain of the boat. I said, “Yes.” “I have orders,” said he, “to bring you to the fort.” “Why?” I asked; and he replied, “I have no time to talk.” Then we started on half a run up the bluff to the fort. When we arrived inside the gate we met Captain Arnold, who said, “Captain, they are waiting very anxiously for you in the next building.” I knocked at the door, and it was opened by Governor Ramsey. Then I learned that the Indians 100 had broken out and were murdering the settlers right and left. General Sibley was also present. The governor said, “We want you to make a quick trip to St. Paul, get arms and ammunition, and return to the fort.” They gave me a detail of twenty men to assist.

As soon as we landed in St. Paul, I went to the arsenal, and started the guns and boxes to the boat. My brother, H. Y. Bell, found Mr. Rider, and they went to the magazine, and got all the ammunition there, that being all there was in the city. We then started to the fort. I had arranged with General Sibley that when we arrived at Mendora island, I was to blow

the whistle, to give him time to meet the boat on the landing. As soon as the general came, we started for the fort, received the troops on board, and went to Shakopee. On our arrival there, we landed all the soldiers except one company, and then went on up the river.

When we rounded the point below Carver, a sight I shall never forget was seen. Men, women, and children, were on the bank of the river, many in their night clothes just as they left their beds to flee from the Indians. There was much rejoicing when they saw the boat had come to their relief. We went about three miles above Carver, there left the remaining soldiers, and then returned to Shakopee.

The next spring we carried the supplies to Camp Pope, at the mouth of the Yellow Medicine river, for General Sibley's troops. This was a dangerous trip, for Indians were seen along the bank of the river. We had a small guard of soldiers on board, and as we had not run at night we took the precaution to anchor the boat in the middle of the river.